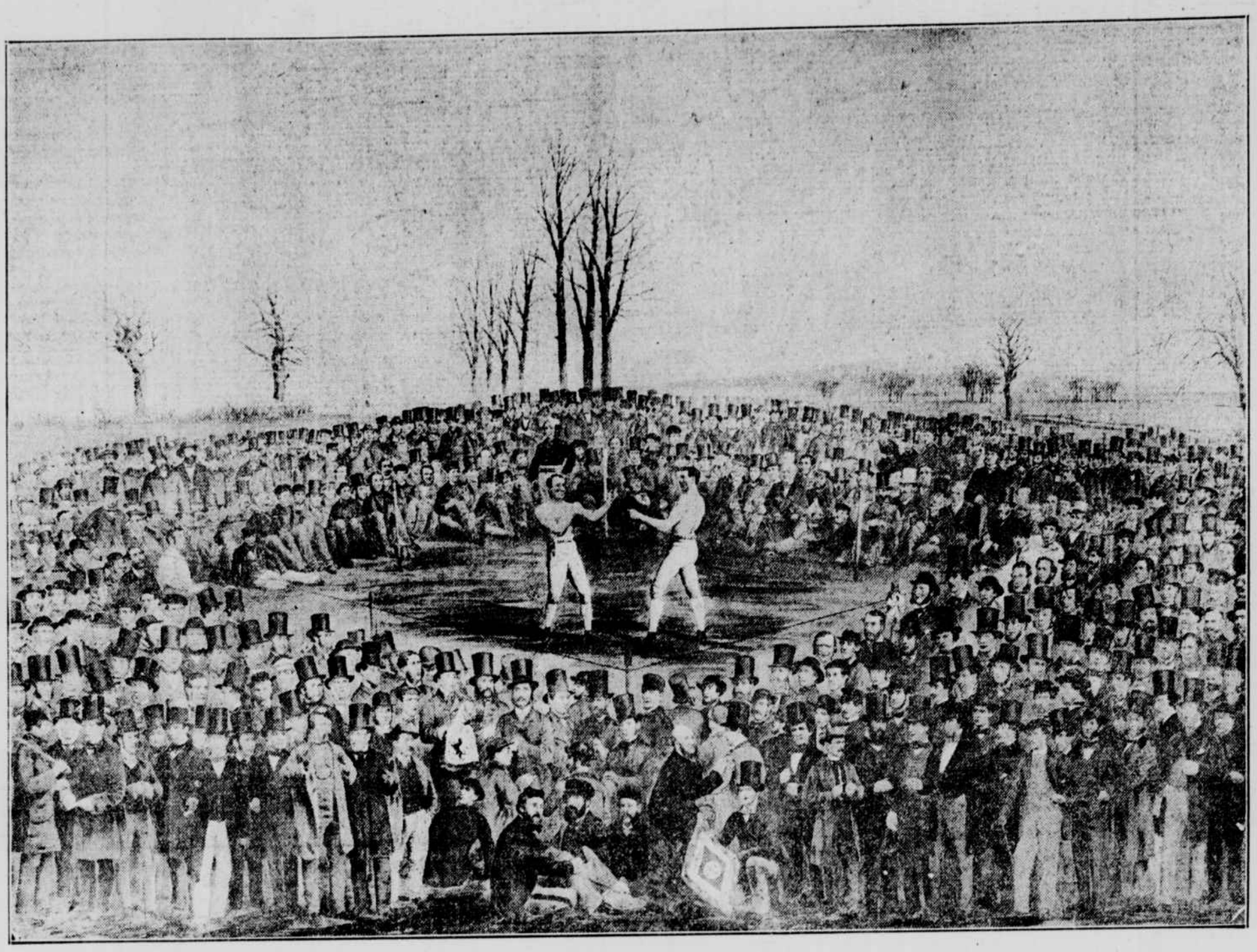
NERO AND TOMNODDY WOULD SCOFF AT BOXING TO-DAY

By W. O. McGEEHAN

The First Known Fight Promoter, "Tex" Nero, Matched Britannus and Ethiopius, and It Was a Case of "Morituri te Salutamus," but There Was No Money in It for Nero.

As for My Lord Tomnoddy, He Would Back the Game Chicken for a Couple of Hundred Pounds Any Day, but His Successor, the Modern Fight Promoter, Is a Parasite.



THE HEENAN-SAYERS FIGHT.

Ringside seats cost no more than those in the gallery, and because of the excellent system of ventilation smoking was permitted in all parts of the house.

THE development of the boxing promoter is hard to trace, owing to the paucity of facts furnished by the sporting writers of olden times. Had there been a Richard K. Fox in the days of the Roman Empire the work of the earnest investigator would be easy. But it seems that the literature of the manly art of self-defence began æons after the art itself was old.

The late Mr. Nero, of Rome, Italy, is the earliest boxing promoter concerning whom we could gather any tangible sort of data, and all that we could learn about him was that he handled boxing entertainments as a side line. Like most of the modern boxing promoters, he was a politician. He was also something of a performer on the fiddle, and wrote verses. The latter count should not be held against him, for the verses may have been written by his press agent.

Getting any real dope on Mr. Nero's boxing entertainments was like getting an appropriation for a new battleship. The historians tried to side-step us. They told us that Mr. Nero was noted chiefly for other forms of entertainment, such as battles between martyrs and lions.

"Nobody wants to know about that kind of entertainment," we told the head historian. "It isn't sport. The lion must have been a sure thing unless the fight was fixed."

That seemed to irritate him. He switched to a long-winded description of fights between men carrying nets and harpoons and men carrying swords and shields. That made us angry.

"Did or did not the late Mr. Nero, of Rome, Italy, promote boxing and handle stables of boxers?"

Finally the historian admitted that he did. We tried to get a line on the heavyweight champion of Rome, but it seems that there were no record books kept in the empire. The Jessicus Willardus of Rome was thus deprived of the credit that was due him.

EMPEROR NERO WAS A BOXING PROMOTER FOR THE FUN OF THE THING.

But we managed to draw from the historians the fact that the late Mr. Nero was a boxing promoter for the fun of the thing. He charged nothing for the boxing shows and he took no percentage from the boxers.

The manly art was a very rough game in those benighted days. It was worse than the London prize ring period, which followed centuries afterward. The boxers wore leather bands and brass knuckles. There was only one round, and it lasted until the Coroner was called in to look over the loser.

There was no chance of fixing a fight then. There was no opportunity for the manager to offer an alibi. There was no referee, for none was needed. Consequently, there were new faces at nearly all of the boxing entertainments.

The late Mr. Nero did not have to bother with the managers of the boxers. They had none. The boys who furnished the bouts for him were doing time for the felony of not being Romans. When Mr. Nero commanded, "Bring on a Briton and an Ethiopian!" there was no talk of the color line. The match was made on the spot. As far as we can gather, Mr. Nero, as a boxing promoter, ran things with a rather high hand. But while historians have charged him with nearly everything else, he never has been accused of putting on a fake fight.

Mr. Nero also spared the early patrons of the boxing game the nuisance of the noisy seconds. In those good old bouts at Rome there were no cries of "Use your left, Britannus!" or "Uppercut him, Ethiopius!" The men in the ring—or, rather, the arena—were allowed to fight their own fight.

Perhaps if Mr. Nero had devoted all of his time to the boxing game, instead of allowing himself to be steered off to side lines, he would have done much more for the manly art. The fact remains that he always tried to make equal matches, and that the ancient Romans could be reasonably sure that every fight was on its merits. His sole idea in promoting boxing was to amuse the Roman people and himself. There are so many good points in favor of Mr. Nero, the fight promoter, that we sometimes think that Mr. Nero, the man, must have been grossly misunderstood by the historians.

WITH REFERENCE TO BOXING, THE DARK AGES WERE DARK INDEED.

Yet in spite of the high standards which the late Mr. Nero maintained at his boxing contests, the manly art seemed to have dropped out of sight as a means of entertainment for a number of centuries. After the cæstus came the bare knuckle era. Again the historians fail us when we most need them. Until the time of Figg, who held the bare knuckle championship in 1719, there is absolutely no authentic record of boxing or boxers.

The boxing promoters who succeeded the late Mr. Nero were also backers of the game purely for the love of the thing. They supported the fighters and put up the purses for the matches. The purses were not the most liberal, but it must be remembered that there were no fighting arenas in those days and no admission was charged. A bit of turf or a tavern floor served for a fighting place.

With the revival of the boxing game in England came the second and the referee. In the good old Roman days there was no need of officials, for there were no rules, once the gong sounded. The bucket and the sponge and the advice from the corner came with the London prize ring rules.

The boxing promoter under this regime was usually a young nobleman with plenty of money. Sometimes he was a squire or a tavern keeper. You will recall Mr. Toots, in "Dombey and Son." He was a type of the fight manager of his period. The Game Chicken, under his management, was a typical prizefighter of the period. The word management is not used in the modern sense here. Mr. Toots paid the Game Chicken's living expenses and lost money every time the Game Chicken fought.

The modern boxing promoter and the modern fight manager are American institutions. They came with the Marquis of Queensberry rules. Under the London prize ring rules in England the notion of capitalizing boxing and the boxers never occurred to the patrons of the sport.

THE MODERN FIGHT PROMOTER THINKS IN TERMS OF DOLLARS ONLY.

Strictly speaking, the modern boxing promoter and the modern fight manager of boxers are parasites. They think in dollars only. The thought of the late Mr. Nero sending in a boxer to be finished in one fight shocks them—not because they feel for the boxer, but they figure that one boxer should reap many purses.

The ancient boxing promoter always tried to make good matches. The late Mr. Nero, from what we could gather, felt deeply pained when a pair of gladiators staged at his club put up a poor exhibition. He made no excuses for them. He inclined his thumb, and they were disposed of with celerity and efficiency.

Mr. Nero never ran to alibis. There is no record of him ever having said: "Britannus went into the fight with a bad right hand and Ethiopius was overweight. They will put up another and a better fight at the Senatus Populusque Club next week, when the price will be only eight drachmas for ringside seats." Not Mr. Nero. In the purest of ancient Latin he would say: "Take those two boobs out!"

For a while the manager of a boxer was forced to risk a certain amount of money in the shape of a side bet, and the promoter was forced to put up a certain amount in the shape of a purse. But not in these days. The manager risks nothing but the life of his boxer. The promoter takes no chance at all, unless he over-estimates the drawing capacity of the men he has matched. It is clear profit for the manager and the promoter. When Americans commercialize a sport and industry or an art, it is always done so that the financier—always the man who puts up no money and has nothing at stake—must have his profits cinched.

The boxing promoter is no longer a sportsman; he is a business man. The handler of boxers is no longer a patron; he is a combination of collection agent, press agent and commission man—particularly the last named. In the modern boxing match there are more blows struck on the cash register than on the human anatomy.

Before the days of the professional boxing promoter and the manager of boxers the process of making a match was ridiculously simple. In the good old days of the late Mr. Nero they were literally made in a moment.

When the good old Emperor saw that his people were weary of the one-sided matches between the martyrs and the lions and were longing for some real excitement, he commanded that the boxers be brought in. "Bring in a couple of good heavyweights," Mr. Nero would say. "A Gaul and a Briton ought to make a good match."

Instead of the tedious formalities which precede the modern boxing contest, the Gaul and the Briton, stripped for the fray and armed with the cæstus, would parade before the Emperor's ringside seat. They would chant "Morituri te salutamus," which was Latin for "It looks like curtains for both of us."

Even before the sportively inclined could get their bets down the bout would begin. Mr. Nero would glance carelessly at an hour glass. By the time he looked up the Gaul would be on the ground.

"Darn the luck!" Mr. Nero would say. "The heavyweight championship has changed hands again; and I didn't even see the knockout punch. Bring in an Ethiopian and see if he can trim this Briton."

And so the sport would go on. The heavyweight championship would probably change hands about a dozen times in one afternoon. If any of the bouts lasted more than a few minutes the Roman mob would begin to clamor, "They're awful! Take them off!" And "taking them off" in those days meant that they were taken off permanently.

Match-making in the days of the London prize ring rules was slightly more complicated. My Lord Tomnoddy meets my Lord Tomfoolery at the Boar's Head Inn.

"Will you back the Game Chicken for a couple of hundred pounds, Ned?" asks my Lord Tomnoddy.

"Done," returns my Lord Tomfoolery.

"We'll have to raise a purse for the beggars, then," continues my Lord Tomnoddy. "I'll go thirty pounds."

"I'll stand another thirty," volunteers my Lord Tomfoolery. "Come, gentlemen, what do you say?"

The other bloods, poorer in purse, finally make up the remaining forty pounds. Jem Simpson and the Game Chicken are sent for, and the time is set for the next morning. The ring is pitched in an adjacent field. The Squire, because of his knowledge of the manly art of self-defence, is made referee.

In the forty-fifth round the Game Chicken gets Jem's head into chancery and pounds him into insensibility. Finally the Chicken throws Jem violently to the ground, and Jem cannot come back to the scratch.

My Lord Tomnoddy hands the purse over to the Game Chicken, who grins a distorted grin because his lips have been split in the bout. There is no loser's end in this fight. My Lord Tomfoolery, who has been cursing over his losses, stops suddenly and tosses a couple of sovereigns over to the beaten man. "You're a game fellow, anyhow," he says. "But, dash it all! why did you let him get your head into chancery?"

THERE WAS NO LOSER'S END TO THE OLDTIME PURSES.

The Game Chicken walks over to Simpson. "Ye fought a fair fight, lad," he says. "Here's a couple more sovereigns for 'ee. I'll set myself up in a tavern now, and you're welcome there any time. No man could be more welcome."

Making a match in 1916 is much more complicated than the putting through of a bigger financial deal. One of the boxers arrives in town with his corps of managers, secretaries, valets and attorneys. He puts up at the most expensive hotel he can find. Two battalions of sporting writers surround the place, and his every movement is recorded in the scurrying editions of the newspapers. The President of the United States is jostled out of the way by the curious crowds fighting for a peep at the champion.

The challenger puts up at the next most expensive hotel. He, too, is flanked by a big retinue. Whenever he moves it is to the accompaniment of clicking cameras and the blaze of flashlights.

The place set for the signing of the historic articles is the ballroom of the most expensive hotel. Seated at a long table on a platform are the promoter, the head managers of the boxers, with their secretaries, stenographers, attorneys and other necessary attendants. The room is packed to the doors with newspaper men and influential citizens.

"We want fifty thousand dollars and 50 per cent of the moving picture rights, and we insist that Bill Spinks referee the contest," the manager for the champion begins.

"Where do you get that stuff?" demands the manager for the challenger. "We have some rights. We are entitled to something."

At this point the attorney for the challenger and the attorney for the champion both try to talk at once. The promoter signals to the head waiter, who transfers the order to his attendants. Waiters begin to load the table with bottles of champagne. The photographers shoot off their flashlights, taking pictures of the intellectual group inclosed in a halo of champagne bottles.

"Make it forty-seven thousand five hundred dollars," pleads the promoter. "That is a lot of money."

"It can't be done," says the manager. "I'd be robbing my family and the families of the other managers if I took a cent less. Besides, we're the champion. It's the other fellow who ought to take the chances."

The attorneys begin to wrangle again, and it looks as though the match might not be made that day. The manager for the champion begins to marshal the assistant managers for a dramatic exit.

"Wait," says the promoter, after a whispered consultation with his lawyers. "We'll make it fifty thousand."

The manager for the challenger rises and makes an effective and touching speech. He tells of the sterling qualities of the fighter under his management, and closes with a firm demand for twenty-five thousand dollars.

The promoter protests faintly. But he has figured in advance that even if he accedes to both demands he will still make upward of fifty thousand dollars out of the match. Finally he consents.

The managers read the articles carefully and the attorneys look at them through microscopes. Suddenly the manager for the challenger says: "We can't sign, because these articles stipulate that Bill Spinks must referee. We object to Bill Spinks."

PICKING A REFEREE IS VERY IMPORTANT, BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER.

"On what grounds?" demands the attorney for the champion.

"On no grounds," replies the manager for the challenger, "excepting that we ought to have something to say about the selection of the referee. I am not going to let the managers for the champion put anything over on *me*."

"Let me select the referee, then," suggests the promoter.

"In justice to myself and to my family, I could not do that," says the manager for the champion. "It must be Bill Spinks or nobody. We can go right back to the circus, you know. We can get five hundred dollars a week without fighting, you know."

As a matter of fact, neither side cares who referees the fight, but these little formalities must be gone through to make everything look regular. The managers of boxers want to impress the world in general with the fact that without managers boxers never could or never would box.

Finally it is agreed that the referee shall be selected at a special meeting of Congress from a number of names submitted by the Cabinet. That much is settled and the extras are released.

Three weeks are occupied in training. Reserved seats to see the boxers going through their calisthenics and breathing exercises are sold at exorbitant prices by the speculators. The newspapers give more space to the training anecdotes than to the European war.

On the night of the bout the banker of the promoter transfers fifty thousand dollars to the banker of the champion and twenty-five thousand dollars to the banker of the challenger. The men in the box office hand the promoter their tentative figures. He notes that he has made seventy thousand dollars, instead of fifty thousand dollars. He is certain that boxing is a noble sport.

After the bout the champion finds that he has skinned one of his knuckles, and he departs immediately for Palm Beach, leaving the managers, the secretaries and the attorneys to attend to the petty financial details. The challenger discovers that one of his eyes has been slightly bruised, so he departs for the Adirondacks to recuperate. He takes only a couple of valets with him, leaving the rest of the retinue to attend to the petty financial matters.

Sometimes the manager is an ex-boxer. Sometimes he is a mere business man, who does not know a right cross from a left shift. A manager does not necessarily have to know anything about boxing. Neither does the modern boxing promoter.

The most successful boxing promoters have been theatrical men or financiers. Their interest in the manly art has been purely financial. That is why we look back at the late Mr. Nero in a kindly spirit. As a boxing promoter he seems to have promoted for the sport's sake alone, without profit and without haggling.

As far as boxing is concerned, the late Mr. Nero was the noblest Roman of them all.

HOW TO MAKE MONEY - - - By Robert J. Wildhack

VIII—SHORT-CHANGING.

Take a job at any window, making change for hurried buyers;
You can make it short a nickel or a quarter, if you're slick.
Though it may not net as much as some of Wall Street's lucky fliers.
Still, it's comforting to know that you can turn a clever trick.

1—Short.
2—Change (part of it).